DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 073 017 SO 005 326

AUTHOR	McPartland, James; And Others
TITLE	Student Participation in High School Decisions. A Study of Students and Teachers in Fourteen Urban High Schools. Summary and Excerpts.
INSTITUTION	Johns Hopkins Univ., Baltimore, Md. Center for the Study of Social Organization of Schools.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. Research and Development Centers Branch.
REPORT NO	JHU-CSSOS-95
BUREAU NO	BR-61610-06-03
PUB DATE	[71]
GRANT	OEG-2-7-061610-0207
NOTE	28p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Decision Making; Educational Research; High Schools; Models; Secondary Education; *Student Attitudes; *Student Participation; *Student School Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

A technical report, summarized in this document, examined the findings of a questionnaire survey conducted in Spring 1970 of a sample of students and teachers in two school systems in the Middle Atlantic states. The study attempted to define and categorize the existing and possible kinds of student participation in high school decisions; to describe the attitudes of these students and staff concerning alternative decision-making procedures; and to analyze some likely effects of different types of student involvement in high school decisions. The five chapters of this document include information on school goals which student participation may affect; distinctions between kinds of student involvement and attitudes of teachers and students about the actual and desired amount of involvement; the analysis of student participation relationships by focusing on student experiences in extra-curricular activities; student involvement in non-academic decisions; and student participation in academic decisions. In general, findings show that within the two groups of students and teachers a great diversity of attitudes and opinions about student participation exists. (Author/SJM)

Center for Social Organization of Schools

Report No. 95

Summary and Excerpts

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN HIGH SCHOOL DECISIONS

A study of students and teachers in fourteen urban high schools

James McPartland, Edward McDill, Colin Lacey, Rubie Harris, Lawrence Novey

SD005326

The Johns Hopkins University

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Summary and Excerpts from:

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Published by the Center for Social Organization of Schools, supported in part as a research and development center by funds from the United States Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Office of Education, and no official endorsement by the Office of Education should be inferred.

The Johns Hopkins University

Baltimore, Maryland

PREFACE

This document summarizes the 275 page technical report Student Participation in High School Decisions which was prepared by the Johns Hopkins Center for Social Organization of Schools, under contract with the U.S. Office of Education. The report examines the findings of a survey conducted in Spring 1970 of a sample of students and teachers in fourteen large urban high schools in two school systems in the Middle Atlantic states.

One quarter of the eleventh and twelfth grade students in these schools completed a 45 minute self-administered questionnaire. A short questionnaire was also mailed to the teaching faculty of these schools. Altogether there were 3450 students and 764 teachers involved in the study.

The report on "student participation in high school decisions" is an attempt:

1) to define and categorize the existing and possible kinds of student participation in high school decisions

2) to describe the attitudes of high school students and staff concerning alternative decision-making procedures

3) to analyze some likely effects of different types of student involvement in high school decisions

The technical report is organized into five chapters. Chapter One outlines some important school goals which student participation may affect. Chapter Two draws basic distinctions between kinds of student involvement, and describes the attitudes of teachers and students about the actual and desired amount of involvement. Chapter Three begins the analysis of relationships with student participation by focusing on student experiences in extra-curricular activities. Chapter Four deals with student involvement in non-academic decisions by examining aspects of student governments and effects of a student court. Chapter Five is concerned with student participation in academic decisions, and discusses some likely outcomes of providing students with alternatives for deciding about the character of their own academic program.

The principal statistical method in the technical report is multiple regression analysis. The conclusions from these analyses, as well as some possible implications for school practice, will be given in this summary document.

CHAPTER ONE

STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND SCHOOL GOALS

Although there is growing interest among educators in providing students with more and different kinds of involvement in many aspects of school life, we still need a great deal more information and knowledge about how student participation in decision-making processes is related to important school goals. In this report, we will consider four goals for schools: developing academic skills, training non-academic talents, increasing student satisfaction and stimulation, and creating a successful school community.

1. The goal of developing academic skills.

Recent studies of differential effects of school experiences have emphasized primarily academic outcomes - grades, test scores, and educational aspirations. Certainly, academic outcomes are a primary goal of schools, and this study will examine student participation as it is related to grades and aspirations. (We will be particularly careful to study how well informed, and serious, students are in their educational aspirations.) But, it is also necessary to examine the effects of school experiences on the development of certain non-academic predispositions and talents among students. This is especially important since other studies are beginning to show that strictly academic performances may not be as important as some non-academic talents in predicting later life success and adult accomplishments.

2. The goal of training non-academic talents.

There are a large number of non-academic talents, predispositions and values that develop in students. This study selects some of these for examiniation. We go beyond the academic outcomes of school experiences by investigating influences on students' growth in "responsibility" and leadership skills. Special indices were designed to measure students' comfort with responsibility, openness to new experiences, initiative and persistence. These measures are used to investigate some possible effects of student participation in terms of non-academic goals of schools.

3. The goal of increasing student satisfaction and stimulation.

Even if we knew the best methods for achieving the optimum student development of academic and non-academic talents, there would be other matters to be considered. One of the most important is the students' reaction to the educational "treatment" they receive--whether they find school stimulating, legitimate and satisfying rather than boring, disrespectful of personal identity and rights, or dissatisfying. This study will also question what effect different decision-making practices may have on such student reactions.

4. The goal of a successful school community.

There are, of course, other members of a school besides students. We also need to consider the needs, desires and rights of teachers and other regular staff members of the school. In particular, we can think of the desires and rights of separate groups in terms of how they affect the relationships between all members who make up the school community. In any community where there is sufficient disagreement among the members on the prerogatives, rights and distribution of rewards among the groups and individuals who make up the community, there will be an atmosphere of hostility and mistrust which can result in disobedience of community laws, revolts and withdrawal from the community. This study will ask how different modes of decision-making may affect the relationships between school members, and minimize the risk of the breakdown of the school community.

CHAPTER TWO

STUDENT AND TEACHER ATTITUDES ABOUT PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL DECISIONS

In order to examine whether student participation in school decisions is related to the school goals outlined in Chapter One, we must define what we mean by student participation.

Stages of the Decision-Making Process

It is helpful to think of decisions in schools as being made at two stages.

At the first stage, governing decisions are made which set the limits for individual behavior in the school. Governing decisions are the laws, rules and regulations which place conditions or restrictions on the choices which individuals may make. In most schools, the governing decisions will affect the choices available for both academic and non-academic behavior in the school. For example, certain governing decisions will define the range of courses from which a student may choose. Other governing decisions may place limits on the style of dress which may be selected. Clearly, such decisions can be made in many ways and for many reasons. We will be interested in looking at student participation in governing decisions in terms of the degree to which students share the authority and influence in making rules which place limits on choice.

After governing decisions are made, the decision-making process can be examined at the second stage, where individuals make choices among the possible alternatives. We will say that students participate in this stage of the decision-making process to the degree that there are many alternatives from which they may make individual choices. Depending on the particular school, students may participate by choosing among alternatives in academic as well as non-academic behavior. Frequently students participate in the academic decision of choosing course assignments, when they are able to individually choose among several course options for themselves. Similarly, students usually are free to select their own dress and hair styles for school, and thus can participate in this non-academic decision through making individual choices.

It is obvious that the outcomes of the first stage of the decision-making process affect student participation at the second stage. Clearly, if the outcomes of governing decisions define only one acceptable behavior, then an individual has no choice to make at the second stage.

Schools will differ in the extent to which they allow students to participate in each stage of the decision-making process. Some schools will not involve students in the first stage, but will allow for participation at the second stage; that is, the limits on behavior are set without student participation, but the limits permit student choice among many alternatives. Other schools may involve students at the first stage but less at the second; students help make rules which leave little discretion open for individual choice. Often, the degree of student involvement at each stage will depend on the content of the behavior involved. For example, governing decisions about academic behavior such as course content may be made with minor student participation, but governing decisions about non-academic behavior such as dress codes involve students to a major degree.

The following diagram summarizes the two stages of the decision-making process, and how students may participate:

Stage One - Governing Decisions	Stage Two - Individual Choice
Students participate to the degree that they share authority and influence in setting limits and conditions on behavior.	Students participate to the degree that there are distinct alternatives for behavior from which they may choose. The outcomes of the Governing Decisions define these alternatives.

These stages exist for decisions of different content, either academic or non-academic. Generally, in this report we will focus on stage one for non-academic decisions (student participation in setting social and political rules) and we will focus on stage two for academic decisions (student choices of course content, obligations and time allocation).

Attitudes About Student Participation

Ratings of students and teachers were obtained of the present and future level of student participation in different kinds of decisions. The most striking finding was the great differences of opinion among students, as well as the variety of attitudes among teachers. All students are not the same, and all teachers are not the same.

On the one hand, there appear to be a great many students who are really not interested in making either governing decisions or individual choices. These students would prefer to be told what is expected of them and what they are to do rather than decide these things for themselves. On the other hand, another large group of students desires less structure and more personal involvement and discretion. Some students want to participate fully in non-academic decisions, but would prefer to leave the academic decisions to the school professional staff. Other students care more about participation in academic decisions than in non-academic decisions.

This variety of opinion was also found among teachers. A large group feels that students need to be strongly involved in various decisions; another large group holds a different opinion.

Figure 1 shows the average student and teacher ratings on the actual and desired amount of student participation in these seven issues: social rules, political rules, course offerings, course assignments, discipline, rating teachers and student grades.[1] From this Figure, and other tabulations on whether student participation should be through a share in authority, or greater communication without authority, the following generalizations were drawn:

1. While both teachers and students believe there should be more student participation in the future on each issue than there is at present, there is a variety of opinion within each group. This means that there can be no single type of school to suit the desires of all members of the system for student participation. Instead, a school system must operate a variety of schools using different regulations and decision-making procedures if it wishes to offer settings to meet the desires of most of its members. At present all of the high schools in most large systems conduct their internal decision-making in much the same way, so a diversity of settings does not exist to match the diversity of desires. Other evidence to be discussed later also points to a need for a variety of schools in terms of decision-making practices.

2. At present, both teachers and students seem to have similar priorities across the seven issues for increased student participation. On the average, both groups generally desire the greatest amount of student participation in non-academic decisions (such as setting social and political rules), and the least amount in academic decisions (such as selecting teachers and deciding course assignments). But while teacher and students both feel student involvement should come first in non-academic decisions and last in academic decisions, the greatest potential for conflict between these groups involves the academic issues.

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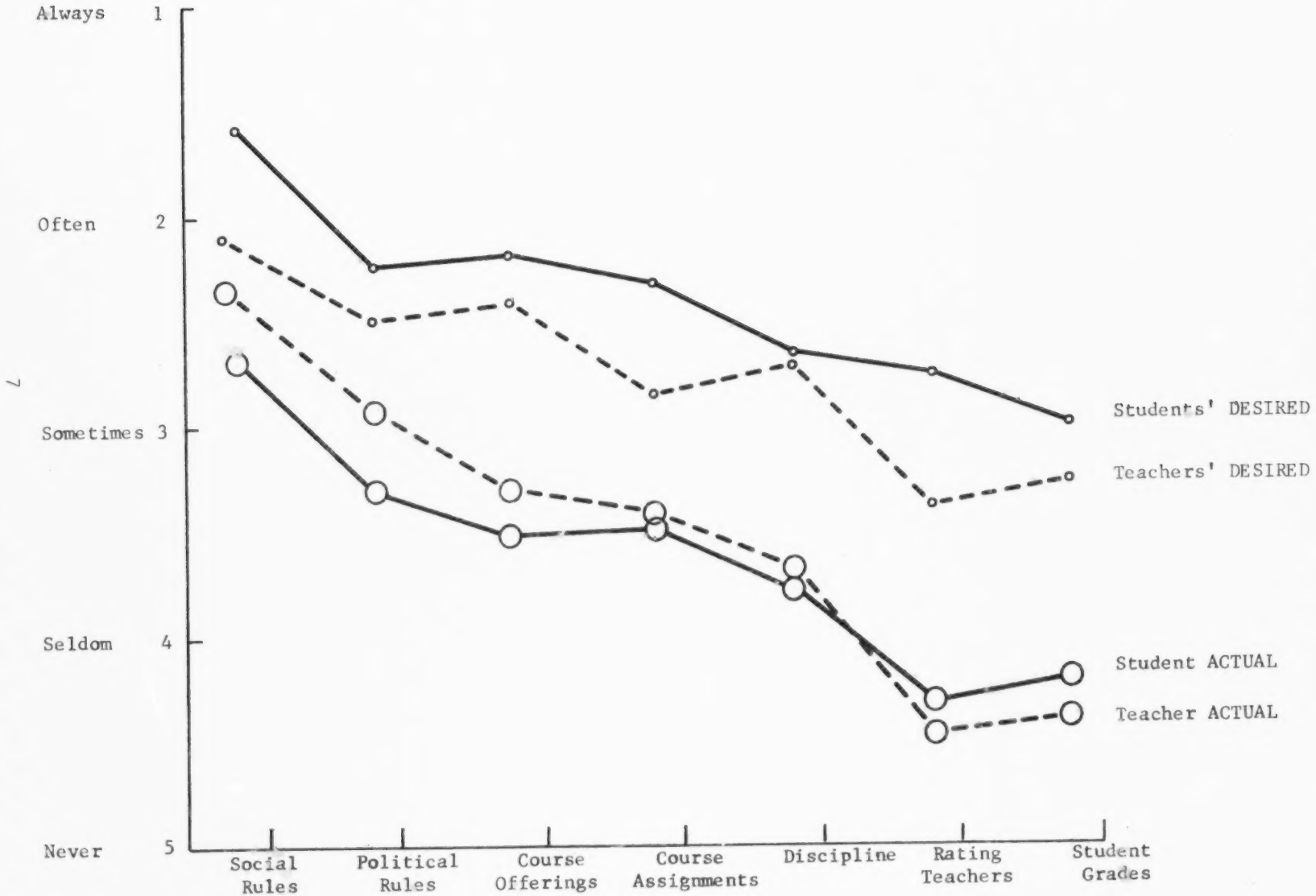
[1] The questionnaire used the following phrases for each type of school decision:

Social rules--"School rules, such as dress codes, hair styles, smoking rules, hall passes, etc."
Political rules--"The use of the school for outside speakers and assemblies, handing out unofficial leaflets and newspapers, or student meetings and political rallies."
Course offerings--"The kinds of courses to be taught in the school."
Course assignments--"The way each student is assigned to courses, and to fast or slow classes."
Discipline--"Disciplining students."
Rating teachers--"Grading and selecting teachers."
Student grades--"Grading students."

The academic issues are: course offerings, course assignments, rating teachers and student grades. The non-academic issues are social rules, political rules and discipline.

FIGURE 1
AVERAGE TEACHER AND STUDENT RATINGS OF ACTUAL AND DESIRED
STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL DECISIONS



Across all issues, the students see the gap between actual and desired student participation to be larger than the gap acknowledged by teachers; but this is especially true for the academic issues. The greatest disagreement between teachers and students on student participation concerns three academic issues--course assignments, selecting and rating teachers, and grading students. Schools can expect deeper and more prolonged disagreements between students and staff when questions of prerogatives concerning academic decisions are raised than has been the case for non-academic decisions, although academic issues have not yet been a prominent concern for student participation.

3. When students were asked to indicate their satisfaction with the outcomes of decisions across seven issues, the average rank order, from high to low, was: course offerings, social rules, teaching, political rules, course assignments, grades and discipline. When another issue, cafeteria service, was added to this list, it turned out to rank lowest in student satisfaction. When students were asked which area of school life was most important to change, the rank order was much the same, with cafeteria service of highest average priority. Apparently, many students (almost one out of five) are more interested in the immediate physical comforts of life in school rather than in school practices which have consequences for them in the long run. If true, this points up a serious problem of lack of attention to academic goals among a sizable proportion of students.

Because the variation in opinions on student participation was so striking, further investigations were conducted of the sources of student attitudes about different issues.

Sources of Variation in Student Attitudes

First, it was found that some students are relatively more dissatisfied with academic issues while others are most disturbed about non-academic regulations. Students are mainly oriented either toward the academic features of school life or toward the non-academic characteristics. If a student was most unhappy with one aspect of the school's non-academic decisions, then he was more likely to be disturbed with other non-academic regulations rather than some academic issue.

In terms of differences in satisfaction, eleventh graders are significantly more satisfied than the twelfth graders in their own school on almost every issue, although they rate issues in the same order. This is our first piece of evidence that older students are less tolerant of strict regulations than younger students. Girls are more satisfied in general than boys. Girls see quality of teaching and grades as more in need of change than boys do, and they see social rules and political rules as less in need of change than boys do. For most of the issues, neither blacks nor whites feel more satisfied or dissatisfied than the other group in the school. However, blacks rank discipline and grading practices higher, and political rules lower,

in priorities for change than whites do. By socio-economic status, the higher SES groups are frequently less satisfied than the lower groups, with political rules and quality of teaching receiving significantly higher priority for the higher SES group. Social rules, course assignments and discipline receive more emphasis from the lower SES students.

But more important than these differences for later purposes is the finding that experiences in earlier life with decision-making are related to a general student desire for say in school decisions. While students from the more economically and educationally advantaged homes are more likely to desire additional involvement in school decisions, the students who are used to a large amount of say in family decisions are most likely to expect the same kinds of opportunities in school.

Along the same line, students with strong local attachments to traditionally oriented communities have fewer demands for participation in school decisions. In addition, the students who are most certain about their occupational destination, or who see the main purpose of schooling to prepare one for a job, have the least desire to get involved in school decisions.

A final note concerning participation opportunities and obligations is added to this descriptive chapter. There are real costs to an individual who participates in school decisions in terms of time in "committee work," willingness to accept blame if decisions turn out badly, and the necessity of considering issues which are not personally interesting in order to maintain support for the decision-making agency. Other studies have shown strong desires of members to participate but reluctance to assume the obligations involved. This dilemma must be understood, and will be discussed in connection with specific school proposals.

* * *

This chapter presented a framework for defining degrees of student participation at two stages of the decision-making process: governing decisions and individual choice.

Student and teacher opinions about student participation were described. The great diversity of attitudes within each group was noted, and some of the sources for particular student attitudes were suggested.

Teacher and student desires give some guidance for developing new decision-making procedures in schools. But the more important information which is needed is evidence of the effects which result from different kinds of student participation. The next three chapters take up this question.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EFFECT OF STUDENT PARTICIPATION AND RESPONSIBILITY IN EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Most high schools are alike in their restrictions on student participation in major academic and non-academic decisions. Therefore, it was necessary to draw many of our general conclusions from a study of the one area of school life where wide variation in student responsibility exists within the school: extra-curricular activities.

The model which was tested and supported is shown in Figure 2.

Participation can bring about three kinds of changes in the school environment, each of which in turn will create changes in different student outcomes. Participation may affect the student's environment in terms of either social integration, new peer norms, or experiences with decision-making. The effects on specific student outcomes will depend on which of these environmental changes occurs.

1. Participation which gives a student the opportunity to control decisions is necessary for effects on the growth of his predispositions toward future responsibility. If participation does not give the student a chance to control decisions, these non-academic effects will not occur. In other words, if students are to learn to accept more responsibility, they must first be given a chance to exercise some real responsibility. (One can't learn to swim if he never goes near the water.)

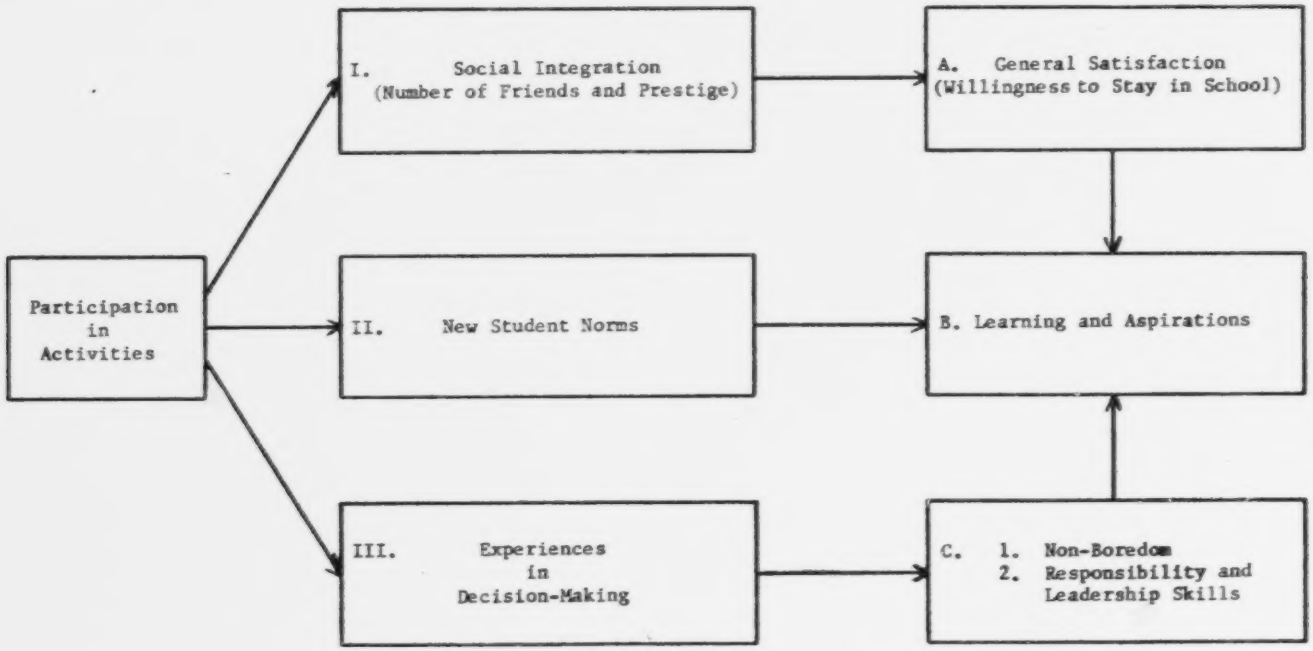
2. Even without these experiences for controlling decisions, participation can affect learning and aspiration if it exposes an individual to new peer norms. On the average, a student who participates in extra-curricular activities gets exposed to peers in these clubs who are more academically oriented than his usual classmates. For the average student, activity-mates are more serious about school and learning than classmates. Consequently, the average student who participates in activities will be likely to alter his own behavior in line with these new norms emphasizing academic pursuits. When activities create new norms about learning because of the different mix of students who join them, there will be an effect on the learning of each of the individual members who are exposed to these new norms.

3. Finally, although participation may offer neither decision-making experiences nor new norms, some effects on students' general satisfaction with school will occur as a by-product of increased social integration. Participation in any activity usually provides a student with a wider circle of friends in the school and more chances to socialize with fellow students, so he feels more included in the life of the school. This greater social integration due to participation

FIGURE 2

A MODEL OF THE WAY PARTICIPATION AFFECTS THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND STUDENT OUTPUTS

When Participation in Activities	creates changes in	School Environment	then there will be changes in	Certain Student Outputs


Participation in Activities
I. Social Integration (Number of Friends and Prestige)
II. New Student Norms
III. Experiences in Decision-Making
A. General Satisfaction (Willingness to Stay in School)
B. Learning and Aspirations
C. 1. Non-Boredom
2. Responsibility and Leadership Skills

creates an increased satisfaction with school in general. Participation in activities, simply through offering opportunities to meet friends and socialize, provides added strength to the school's holding power.

Participation and Academic Outcomes

All three kinds of changes in the environment which participation may facilitate--social integration, new norms, and decision-making experiences--were found to have direct or indirect effects on such academic outcomes as grades and informed educational aspirations. But, of the three, experiences with decision-making had the strongest influence on academic outcomes.

The inclinations toward responsibility which are developed in students who practice making decisions in activities are directly related to academic ambitions and success. The students who not only have plans for college, but also who have followed up these plans by fully informing themselves about specific colleges, are the students who are highest on scales of responsibility. Likewise, students who are receiving the highest grades in their courses are the ones who have developed the strongest predispositions toward personal responsibility. In other words, both informed college aspirations and grades in courses are significantly related to a student's sense of personal responsibility. As we have noted, this sense of personal responsibility is fostered by those activities which give students practice in decision-making. Thus activities where students are given wide responsibility affect their academic ambitions and success, because they help students grow in responsibility which is related to academic outcomes.

Much weaker and more indirect effects on academic outcomes for students were found for participation without decision-making experiences. Participation in activities which bring together new mixes of students has an influence on academic success only for those individuals whose activity-mates are much more academically conscious than their regular classmates. When classmates have strong academic inclinations, no strong effects of the peer norms in activities can be found on academic outcomes. Similarly, academic effects from greater social integration due to participation are only found when all other influences are weak. Social integration shows an academic effect only when "new peer group norms" or "experiences with decision-making" are weak. In the activities where these two influences are not strong--as in participation without responsibility and without new peer groups--some small academic effects due to greater social integration can be found.

Generally, then, student participation has its most important consequences for student academic learning when it allows students to practice controlling decisions, which develops the inclinations for taking future responsibility that are related to academic success.

The Process of Developing Responsibility

Like all studies which examine data collected at one point in time, it is difficult to determine the direction of causality which underlies relationships between variables. In this case, it was important to know whether experiences in activities caused changes in individual students, or whether students who were different to begin with were the ones who joined activities.

It was concluded that the relationships found were the result of both the self-selection of students and the consequences of experiences in the activities themselves. Students who were initially different in family experiences volunteered for specific roles in activities. But when measures of initial differences were statistically controlled, the effects of type of participation remained strong. Also, it appeared that those who started out highest in their attitudes toward responsibility and who also experienced the greatest opportunities for exercising responsibility in school, changed most in greater predispositions toward responsibility.

The process through which responsibility develops seems to operate in a "rich get richer" manner. Students who are initially most open to assuming responsibility are more likely to take the leadership opportunities which are available, and as a consequence are the ones who grow most in their readiness and skill at handling these tasks in the future.

Schools should be able to take advantage of this "snowballing effect" in training students to assume responsibility. At each stage of schooling, beginning in the early grades, schools should give all students practice in assuming new responsibilities. They will then be preparing students for a next stage of increased responsibility, and also accelerating the process through which a fully-adult competence at welcoming and dealing with responsibility is achieved.

* * *

Extra-curricular activities provide opportunities for very different kinds of student participation: participation where there are increased chances to socialize with other students, participation which introduces a student to peers he would not ordinarily meet, and participation which allows a student to control decisions and exercise real personal responsibility.

By studying extra-curricular activities, we can learn how these types of participation in <u>other</u> areas of school life could affect student outcomes.

Participation which gives students decision-making experience has the strongest effects. Students with these experiences develop

stronger inclinations toward taking personal responsibility in the future, and as a consequence are more successful and ambitious in their academic work in school. Thus, in other areas of school life, if students are to grow in responsibility and decision-making ability, they must be given chances to practice new decision-making authority. Without this practice, they are being deprived of the necessary training ground for developing increased responsibility and decision-making skill. Participation which does not permit students to control decisions cannot help train them for future roles of responsibility. But it may have other effects.

If participation simply brings together a new mix of student values and skills, then new peer norms for behavior are likely to develop. Extra-curricular activities will often expose an individual to more academically-oriented peers than he would find in his own classes. In this case, the influence of these new peers will rub off on the individual who, as a result, is likely to become more academically-oriented himself. Therefore, in other areas of school life, when student participation and choice result in new mixes of the student population of a school, we can expect students to be exposed to new norms for behavior, some of which may bring strong incentives for increased academic interest.

But even if participation offers neither decision-making experiences nor new peer groups, and simply gives a student a greater chance to meet and socialize with other students in the school setting, some effects can be detected. Students who have greater opportunities to socialize with other students in the school are generally more satisfied with school and more willing to attend than other students who are not as socially integrated into the school. We would expect, therefore, that participation in other areas of school life which simply provides students with a greater chance to get to know and interact more frequently with other students will increase their satisfaction with school.

Participation can come in different forms, and each extra element adds a potentially different effect on students. Participation to increase social integration affects students' general satisfaction. If participation also adds new peer group mixes, new student norms will be developed, often emphasizing academic interest. If decision-making experiences are added, responsibility and decision-making skill will be increased, with more successful academic pursuits resulting as a by-product.

CHAPTER FOUR

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN NON-ACADEMIC DECISIONS

Non-academic decisions are the decisions about student dress and hair styles, smoking, use of halls and lockers, distribution of unofficial leaflets and newspapers, student meetings and rallies. In short, everything but the program of instruction.

Following the outline in Chapter Two, non-academic decisions go through two stages. Each may involve students. At the first stage, governing decisions are made that define the limits within which students must select their behavior. At the second stage, students choose their individual behavior from the alternatives, if any, that are permitted by the governing rules.

This chapter will focus mostly on governing decisions. It will examine student attitudes toward their student government and investigate what happens when student representatives hold a significant share of the authority for creating or enforcing non-academic rules. A study is also reported of some important effects of student involvement at both the first and second stages of non-academic decisions.

Attitudes about Student Government

A student government in high school can provide at least two functions: (a) organizing certain social services for students, and (b) offering political access to students personally interested in changing the school's non-academic rules.

Most high school students look to the student government for the social services it can provide such as dances and special events. Since student governments seem to provide these services quite well, most students are generally satisfied with the way student government functions.

But in every school, a minority of students have specific ideas about school changes they would like to see occur. These students want more from their student government than good social services; they desire political access to authority to get a hearing for their ideas. Student government does not seem to give these students an avenue of expression and influence to satisfy their needs.

In ten of the fourteen high schools, students were asked to name the fellow-student at their school who "demands changes in the school." When comparisons were made between students so named and the others, it was clear that students who are most interested in school changes

are most dissatisfied with student government. They are dissatisfied because student governments do not provide political access to the authorities.

Sometimes these students found that eligibility requirements for candicacy kept them from participation in student government. Typically, however, these politically-minded students did join the student government, but their attitudes--instead of improving--grew slightly more negative and cynical.

We have no evidence on the possible effects of a student government which actually does give politically-minded students a ready access to authority, simply because no school in the sample has a student government which extends very far beyond the social service functions.[1] However, we can get some information about how students are affected by participation in authority from a school where students shared the responsibility for enforcing non-academic rules.

The Enforcement of Non-Academic Rules

One school in the sample of fourteen had an unusually active "student court" where students participated in the enforcement of certain non-academic rules. (In this school 53 percent of the teachers and 37 percent of the students believe students actually have a great deal of say in discipline, compared to an average of only 9 percent and 14 percent in the other thirteen schools.)

Students in the school with the student court, compared to students in the other thirteen schools, have more positive attitudes toward non-academic regulations and procedures. They have a stronger belief that their school maintains high standards of justice. They say they are more satisfied with the way students are disciplined and more satisfied with the rules and regulations themselves. These differences favoring the student court school are statistically significant in analyses which take into account the grade level, sex, race and socio-economic status of the students.

It is important to note that the more favorable attitudes in the student-court school are reflected by the student body-at-large as well as by the students who actually serve on the court. When students believe their interests are being voiced by student

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[1] A survey and description of the variety of school policy committees with student membership which presently exist in American secondary schools can be found in the ERS Circular No. 6, Framework for Student Involvement. Single copies can be purchased for $1.25 from Educational Research Service, American Association of School Administrators and NEA Research Division, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

representatives, the resulting rules and regulations are seen by all as more legitimate and deserving of respect. Moreover, it is not only the students who never get into trouble who believe the student court is valuable, but also the students who have actually been disciplined have more positive attitudes.

These results are not caused by the student-court school having less strict rules to regulate behavior. In fact, the school with the active student court is seen by students to be the most strict of the fourteen schools in the sample.[1] When this fact is statistically controlled in the analysis, the positive effects of the student-court school become even larger.

We can draw some general implications from these results. When students feel they have a share of real authority in making governing decisions for non-academic behavior, there will be a greater respect for the resulting rules and regulations (even though they may be strict) both by the student representatives who help make the decisions and by the other students in the school.

Participation and School Stability

The analysis of the student court school suggests that participation at both stages of the decision-making process can be important. Both student participation in governing decisions (applying limits on behavior) and participation through opportunities for individual choice (the strictness of the rules) were related to student attitudes. Following this lead, a further study was made of how student participation at both stages is related to school stability.

A stable school community is one which minimizes withdrawal, revolt and disobedience. Accordingly, school stability was measured by the amount of truancy, student attitudes toward vandalism and student attitudes toward protests. For each of these measures, it was shown that both student participation in governing decisions (making the non-academic rules) and student participation through individual choice (the strictness of the rules) was significantly related to a stable school community. (In these analyses the perceived effectiveness of the schools' academic program was statistically controlled.)

But of the two stages in the non-academic decision-making process, one was more strongly related to school stability than the other. Student participation in making governing decisions (setting

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[1] The strictness of the rules is actually a measure of the opportunity for students to participate at the second stage of the decision-making process through individual choice. The stricter the rules, the fewer alternatives there are for students to exercise individual choice.

the rules) was consistently more important for school stability than degree of student choice under the rules (the permissiveness of the rules). School stability is more likely with strict rules which the students help draw up, than with permissive rules which students had no part in deciding.

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Non-academic decisions deal with behavior outside of the regular instructional program of the school. These decisions can be very important to the climate and stability of the school.

The student government is the usual mechanism for student participation in school governing decisions for non-academic behavior. The survey showed this to be a potentially powerful influence for school goals, but one which is presently ineffective.

Most students simply want social services -- such as dances -- from the student government, and they are satisfied. But the students who want to play a part in deciding school rules are the ones most dissatisfied with the student government, even when they occupy student government offices. They do not find a viable mechanism for participating in governing decisions.

The potential effects on students of participation in non-academic decisions was shown in terms of commitment to school rules and with respect to a stable school community. In a school where student representatives have some authority for making the rules, these rules are seen as more fair and legitimate. Student participation in establishing the limits to non-academic behavior was more important to a stable school community than limits created without student involvement which permitted a great deal of individual freedom and choice.

CHAPTER FIVE

STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN ACADEMIC DECISIONS

Academic decisions concern the program of instruction a student receives. For example, academic decisions determine the courses, teachers, grading methods and style of instruction to which a student will be exposed.

As with other decisions, academic behavior is decided in two stages. At the first stage, (which we call "governing decisions") the alternative academic offerings from whi a student may select are defined. At the second stage, (which we call "individual choice") a student selects from the alternatives presented to him, if any.

In contrast to our treatment of non-academic decisions, where we looked mainly at student participation in making governing decisions, for academic decisions we will emphasize the second decision-making stage (individual choice).

Participation in non-academic decisions emphasized a select group of students in the school: those with specific grievances or interest in the school's non-academic rules. The procedures for non-academic decisions were judged in part by how effectively they permitted a share of authority for those students who were interested. Our perspective is quite different for academic decisions, for these decisions concern the great majority of students, even though they may have no strong interest in academic matters to begin with. In fact, we will judge modes of student participation in academic decisions by how well they capture the attention and interest of all students.

For this purpose, it will be shown that participation through individual choice, rather than participation through governing decisions, holds the greatest potential. We begin by listing some dimensions of academic choice that may be presented to all students.

Dimensions of Academic Choice

Choice of course offerings or classroom assignments may be presented to students in five different ways.

1. Choice of academic content. Academic content is the specific subject matter of a course or classroom assignment, as reflected by the substantive topics, questions, and reading materials.

Students can be presented with many alternative academic contents, even within required subject areas. For example, in the area of English,

rather than requiring all twelfth grade students to take a single course called English 4, a school could offer a variety of courses that specify different readings, topics and approaches. (One high school course catalog listed offerings with reading lists in English under such titles as "The Poetry of Revolution," "Writing Mystery Stories," and "Contemporary American Drama.") Similarly, in a single social studies class, students are presented with alternative projects to choose among for each main unit of the syllabus. (One project was always "independent study," where students could propose activities for themselves.)

2. Choice of academic obligations. Academic obligations are the requirements for receiving credit and the standards to be used in evaluations. Academic obligations are reflected in the level of difficulty of a course (e.g. track level), the amount of homework assigned and the time and effort expected, and the standards used in constructing and evaluating examinations.

The obligations in courses and assignments usually differ within a school, but rarely can students choose among these differences. A few schools, however, do use a system of "optional tracks," where students select the level of difficulty of the courses in which they will enroll. Some other schools have courses where teachers "contract" with students for the projects they will complete. Such contracts specify what will be accomplished by both student and teacher, as well as the expected completion date. To demonstrate their agreement about obligations in these cases, both the student and the teacher sign the "contract."

3. Choice of academic time allocation. Academic time allocation is the pace and sequencing of academic activities. This includes the schedule of activities during a single day, as well as across the years of high school.

Most schools determine the time allocation of students almost completely, but there are some exceptions. A few schools provide students with unscheduled time each day, which can be used in a variety of ways and in a variety of locations. (Resource centers and open shops and laboratories are made available as one alternative.) Some schools with this time flexibility allow students to schedule their classes each day, so a student can attend English classes in either the morning or afternoon, or both if he wishes. Other schools give a student wide latitude in sequencing his courses across his high school career, opening such possibilities as completing all social studies area requirements in a concentrated period by taking multiple offerings each term. Similar latitude in sequencing can often be provided within a single course, by permitting each student a choice of the ordering of the units he will cover over the term. Such individual scheduling permits a student to spend more time on one unit and less on another, depending on his individual pace of work.

4. Choice of Teachers. Some schools permit students not only to choose their own courses, but at the same time to select their own teachers. Classes are filled on a first-come, first-served basis, with some arrangement worked out in order to give all students a chance at getting earliest choice (by age or by a revolving alphabetic list.)

To aid students in this choice, one school had departmental meetings with students before registration where teachers would describe their course offerings, expectations, approach, and goals for the course.

5. Choice of grading methods. There are a variety of grading schemes besides the numerical ratings based on class standing ("grading on the curve") which is typically used in high schools. Rather than numerical ratings, a simple pass-fail (or credit-no credit) designation can be made. Or, grades can be based on reference groups other than the classroom distribution of performance. For example, each individual's starting point can be his reference point, and growth rates be graded. Grades or credit can also be weighted by the difficulty of the course (similar to the way colleges assign different credit hours to the courses.) Or no grades (and no credit) can be assigned, when course auditing is permitted.

Some schools use a number of grading schemes and allow students some choice in the matter. For example, a student might be permitted to take any single course of his choosing on a pass-fail basis. Or, the first course in a subject can be taken without any permanently recorded evaluation.

Many academic programs and courses can be open to student academic choice along one or several of these dimensions. The next section suggests how such academic choice can bring about new academic strategies among students.

Effects of Student Academic Choice on School Goals

In the survey, one high school provided students with an unusual degree of academic choice. At this school, there are four terms in each nine-month academic year. At the beginning of each term, the students are presented with a catalog of course offerings and permitted to choose their own courses and teachers from this unusually rich set of offerings. There are required "areas" from which students must select one of several offerings, and there are frequently prerequisites for admission to advanced courses. Nevertheless, students and teachers in this school recognize that students have an unusual amount of say in deciding their academic program.[1]

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[1] For example, in the particular school 60 percent of the students and 48 percent of the teachers reported students actually have a great deal of say in the selection of teachers compared to an average of only 7 percent of the students and 2 percent of the teachers in the other thirteen schools. Similarly, 46 percent of students (compared to 22 percent in other schools) and 24 percent of the teachers (compared to 6 percent) reported that students actually have a great deal of say in the way each student is assigned to courses.

We can examine the effects of academic choice by comparing this one particular school--which we will call the "academic-choice school"--with the other thirteen schools on some important academic outcomes and school goals. Three classes of effects are examined in this way: effects on student's academic attention and strategy, effects on teacher-student hostility, and effects on student academic effort.

1. Effects on students' academic attention and strategy.

The effects of choice upon educational aspirations was studied. Two measures of aspirations were used: the students' plans to go to college, and college-related activities such as reading college catalogs, contacting college officials, and seeking information about colleges from teachers and school counselors. Earlier research has shown that the college-related activities measure will identify the students who have given most serious attention to their educational future and who hold the most realistic and accurate college plans.

While there was no difference between the college plans of students in the academic-choice school compared to students in the other thirteen schools, there were significant differences in college-related activities. After controlling for the differences among students--sex, race, grade, social class, and expressed college plans--the students at the academic-choice school are shown to have engaged more frequently in the college-related activities and information seeking.

The requiring of students to make individual academic selections is given as a direct explanation for the greater attention to educational plans on the part of students in the academic-choice school. Requiring students to make their own academic choices forces greater attention to long-and short-run consequences of education, since this information is needed in making the choices. When students are given alternatives, they will naturally seek information about what makes one alternative better than another, so they have a good basis for making their selection. As a consequence, they are more informed about their academic program.

When students are required to choose their own academic program, they will also be more committed to it. They will find reasons for their personal selection. Not only will they have more reasons for attending to academic programs they choose, but also the reasons will be more personal and more carefully considered.

Besides using measures of college plans and college related in our investigation of effects of academic choice, we also examined effects on general attitudes of responsibility. (In Chapter 3, we saw that attitudes of responsibility were related to academic performance as measured by grades.) Again, the positive influence of the academic-choice school was revealed. The students in this school were found to be significantly higher on important attitudes of responsibility.

2. Effects on teacher-student hostility.

Attendance at the academic choice school was significantly and positively related to student satisfaction with the teachers and with the instruction they received. Students in the schools where they selected their own courses and teachers gave significantly higher ratings of "how well the courses are taught at this school," and of their teachers' ability. The students with more choice were also significantly more satisfied with the course offerings and course assignments. (These results were obtained after taking into account student differences in grade level, sex, race and socioeconomic status.)

There are at least three reasons why providing students with greater academic choice might be expected to produce less hostility and more trust and respect between students and teachers. One major source for friction is what has been called "the battle of the requirements"--the tension over deciding and enforcing what is expected from a student for a good grade. When students must make choices among courses having different specific obligations (amount of homework, difficulty level of material, etc.), some of this tension is displaced. Essential elements of the conflict over requirements would be resolved by the students' choice, rather than having to be settled between teacher and student after the course begins. Teachers of demanding courses would be more able to use the logic often employed by private schools or colleges: "No one asked you to be here, so if you don't want to live up to the obligations which this choice involves, make another choice." In short, part of the strain about requirements is displaced from student-teacher relationships to the choice procedure itself.

Secondly, choice by course content would increase the likelihood that students would have strong intrinsic interest in the course materials to begin with. As discussed in the previous section, the requirement that one choose between alternatives creates the information seeking behavior through which individuals find added reasons to be committed to their selection. This also would reduce the need for pressure from the teacher to motivate the students to pay attention and learn. Finally, giving students direct choice of their own teacher should also improve interpersonal relationships. The match between teacher and student "styles" and personalities would probably be improved under a system where students selected their teachers.

3. Effects on students' academic effort.

A crucial question about giving students academic choice is whether they will "take the easy way out" by selecting only those courses where the work is least and the grading the softest. Some evidence shows that certain conditions surrounding academic choice may help determine whether students will voluntarily commit themselves to serious academic effort.

One condition which affects the chance that a student will select a challenging course of study is the number of different choices he is able to make at the same time. For example, if a student is able to choose five different subjects, he is more likely to select at least one demanding subject, than if he had only one subject open to his choice. In a sense, students tend to follow a strategy of "balancing their bets": for every demanding course they choose, a less demanding course is selected in another area to balance the investment.

In the survey, students were asked to construct a program of courses for themselves by selecting four courses (English, Math, Science, Social Studies), each at a specified level of difficulty. Almost three-quarters of the students voluntarily selected at least one course at the highest level of difficulty, even though they knew much work was required and it would be hard to get a good grade. (At the same time, very few of the students made more than two of their four choices at the most difficult level.) Had only one course been open to choice, many fewer students would have selected the highest level. For example, when students could balance their investment in a difficult English course with more modest choices in other courses, more than 40 percent picked the most demanding English course. Had only English been open to choice, with the students assigned to the other three courses, the percent choosing the highest level would have been much smaller.

A second condition potentially affecting student commitment to serious academic effort is the grading system. The pattern of student course choice was strongly related to their past grades in the same area. Students make choices to maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. The student who has received good grades in mathematics is most likely to make this his most demanding choice.

When students are considering the costs and rewards of alternatives, they are often balancing three things: what they feel they will learn from the course, how hard they are willing to work in terms of time and effort, and their chance of getting a good grade for a given amount of effort. Different grading systems - such as the "pass-fail" option, or grades weighted by level of difficulty -- may be able to remove or minimize the last concern so the first two become uppermost in a students' strategy. We had no direct evidence that more students would select demanding courses if the threat of a grade penalty was changed. But it is clear that the grading system is one important condition to be experimented with under programs which give students more academic choice.

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Student participation in decisions through individual choice is particularly important for academic decisions. Potentially, this kind of participation can directly influence the largest number of students, including those who initially pay little attention to academic goals and behavior.

A scheme for describing and analyzing the kinds of alternatives for academic choice was presented. Choice alternatives were classified by course content, academic obligations, time allocation, choice of teachers, and choice of grading methods. This scheme is presented to classify current school and classroom practices as well as for possible innovation in student participation in academic decisions.

Effects of wider student academic choice were identified in terms of (a) student attention and interest in their academic program and its consequences for them, and (b) a reduction in the amount of hostility and suspicion between students and teachers.

We discussed conditions which may affect the degree to which students, when given academic choices, will select the more demanding educational experiences. The number of simultaneous choices to be made, and the grading system, were suggested as conditions which influence a student's willingness to make selections which require extensive time and effort on his part.